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ABSTRACT

To help high school students find enjoyment and intellectual stimulation in poetry, an English teacher may use several techniques. First, the course may be introduced by stating objectives and procedures, and by asking students for ideas about the value of reading and studying poetry. The teacher should involve all students, especially the reluctant ones, by making a large number of poetry collections available to students and having them browse until they find poems that they like. Then each student may make a copy of his or her poem and prepare to read it aloud the next day in class. The teacher may read for the reluctant students, arrange chairs in a circle for intimacy, and encourage students to tell why they liked a poem. Some poems selected may be used to provoke excellent discussion and writing assignments. This last procedure enables students to learn the usual things teachers teach about poetry, such as terminology, symbols, and types of poetry, while at the same time providing enjoyment for the student. (SW)

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A STUDENT ORIENTED APPROACH TO TEACHING POETRY

Nancy Womack

Ted is a student in a small high school where schedules are hand made and hard to change. In any given time slot there are just so many alternatives, and students are placed either here or there in a manner which to some might resemble a dealer shuffling a giant deck of cards. At least it seemed that way to Ted when he found himself in a sixth period, spring semester, class of poetry and drama. The usual trip to the counselor ensued, and indeed he was shown in black and white that it had to be that way: after all, he had already taken the only other English course which was being offered sixth period; he had to have an English class; and there was no way the other five cards could be redealt to change things. So it was that Ted Simmons, the least likely candidate in the world, came to be a member of a class which was to become one of the most prestigious, most involved groups in the entire school in the spring of '73.

Involved, however, was not the word to describe Ted during the first day of class. Since it was a small group, I, as the teacher, asked the students to sit together on one side of the room, but Ted insisted on sitting on the opposite side with his head on his desk.

CS 201 609

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Deciding to ignore him for the time being, I went on with the usual introduction to a new course routine--expressing my own enthusiasm for the subject, stating objectives and approaches we might take, while at the same time pulling from the students their own ideas about the value of reading and studying poems and plays.

The second day Ted's quiet, isolated rebellion was harder to ignore, and quite frankly, it was making me very nervous, especially since Ted and I were not strangers. He had been in another of my classes first semester in a different time slot, and the Ted who sat in my classroom now, in the same chair he had occupied before, was a very different person and one whom I was not at all sure of.

My plan for the day was to make a large number of poetry collections available to the students and have each one browse and read until he found a poem that he especially liked. Then he was to make a copy of that poem and be prepared to read it aloud the next day in class. With the informality of everyone milling around the room reading and talking to each other, I decided that this was the opportune moment for approaching Ted. In the next few minutes I found out the following things:

1. He was upset about his schedule.
2. He didn't have any friends in the class.
3. He was younger than most of the other students.
4. He knew he wasn't as smart as the other students.
5. He didn't like poetry and was afraid he would fail the course.

Is it any wonder he put his head on his desk and dropped out the first day? Since I knew him and could understand his anxieties, I proceeded to give him the following assurances:

1. He would not fail the class if he became involved and tried to complete the assignments as they were given.
2. Most of the literature would be read and discussed in class with adequate reviews and study sheets made available before tests.
3. Students, including himself, would be involved in selecting the literature, particularly the poetry.

This brought us around to the immediate assignment. I discussed it with him and suggested that he browse through a copy of Scholastic Book Services' Within You Without You, a collection of poems about friendship and all kinds of love edited by Be[illegible]y Ryan. Many of these poems are especially selected for teenagers. Some are quite simple and most are easy to read and understand. But Ted was apprehensive about reading out loud. So I told him to make a selection and I would read it for him. Then I left him alone with the book, went to check on the rest of the class, and promised a couple of others that I would also read for them. Besides wanting

to be fair, I thought it would do Ted a great deal of good to know that he was not the only one who was a little bit afraid.

The next day, to make the reading session more intimate (and partly to assure that Ted wouldn't isolate himself again), I arranged exactly seventeen chairs in a circle and pushed the extras into an inaccessible corner of the room. Everybody in the class brought in a poem and each in turn either read or had me read his selection to the rest of the group. Then in quiet, serious tones each explained why he chose his particular poem. When Ted said, "I don't know why I picked it; I just liked it," I knew he was on his way. In his own words he admitted that he liked a poem. Only the day before he said he didn't.

Several things came out of that reading session. One was a request by the majority of the class to have more--a request which eventually worked its way into weekly sessions. Another was the decision on the part of the class, at my recommendation, to adopt Within You Without You as the book the class would purchase and use for in-depth study of poetry. Before the semester was over we had read everything in it from Ted's first selection of a little poem called "It's Hard" by Allyson Davis to T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song

of J. Alfred Prufrock." Much good discussion came out of it, and some of the poems were read over and over again as different people selected them for oral reading days.

Among the more popular selections were "Scared to Be Alone" by Dory Previn; "To My Friend" by an anonymous author; "Incident" by Countee Cullen and "To Be in Love" by Gwendolyn Brooks.

The Dory Previn poem was first brought to our attention by a shy, sensitive girl named Dianne. She said that the accompanying photograph of a girl in a clear plastic mask aroused her interest in the poem more than the title or anything else about it. But once she read the words she was intrigued with the ideas it presented and the fact that she could identify with what Ms. Previn was saying. After reading the whole poem, she went back and reread the part which she liked best:

> when someone is around us
> we don't know what we're seeing
> we take a polaroid picture
> to find the human being
> we never stop to wonder
> til a person's gone
> we never yearn
> to know him
> till he's packed
> and traveled on

Another time a student named Linda read the same poem and talked

about the allusions to Jesus and Marilyn Monroe. And we all discussed the question "Are you scared to be alone?"

"To My Friend" was selected one day by a student named Mike who always made the transformation from class clown to serious scholar when it was his time to read. This poem beginning with the lines "I love you not only for what you are
But for what I am when I am with you" provoked an excellent discussion and writing assignment on the nature of friendship. It also served as a take off point for reading and discussing other poems about friendship including the Carole King song "You've Got a Friend." Someone brought the album in the next day, but before letting them listen to it, I insisted that they defend it as poetry. (Another little lesson I'd been saving for the appropriate time.) "After all," I said, "If someone from the administration comes in here, I don't want them to think we're having a party. So how could I justify it?" Immediately they threw back at me every characteristic of poetry I had outlined for them during the first few days of class, and in so doing, they sowed the seed for another lesson which would follow later on the subject of music as the poetry of today's generation.

"Incident" and "To Be in Love" were originally selected by students--"Incident" by a black student named Joe, and "To Be in Love" by a white girl named Janis. It was quite obvious that "Incident" was authored by a black poet, but no one in the class knew that Gwendolyn Brooks was also black. I used this for another mini-lesson--to point out that poetry written by members of minorities can't be categorically classified as "black poetry" or Jewish poetry" or "Indian poetry" or anything else--that while some of it may be built around ethnic references, much more of it will be universal because all men have the same emotions, share many of the same experiences and appreciate many of the same things. To emphasize the point, I had Joe reread "Incident" with its obvious ethnic reference; then I read another poem by Countee Cullen entitled "To John Keats, Poet, at Springtime" to show his universal and intellectual side.

Throughout the nine weeks during which the class concentrated on poetry we used the same informal "give and take" approach; yet, the students were exposed to all the usual things teachers teach about poetry--terminology when metaphors and similes, symbols and allusions were pointed out to them; facts about authors' lives when

the facts were relevant to the poem; types of poetry; and even a few things about meter and rhyme--after all, they had to understand iambic pentameter in order to know that Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Here Is a Wound That Never Will Heal I Know" is a sonnet--or would they? All this, however, was incidental to the primary purpose as I saw it at that time: to help sixteen high school students see enjoyment and intellectual stimulation in the art form of poetry--not necessarily to see it as something which has to be beautiful (though much of it is), or as something to be cried over (though some of them did)--but instead to see it as something that is <u>real</u>.

Before the semester was over, all the students, including the originally reluctant Ted, were reading for themselves on reading days, and no one seemed to mind if he or anyone else had to stop every now and then to find out how to pronounce a word. Not only were they all openly admitting that they liked poetry, but they were also amazed at how much they had learned about each other merely on the basis of the poems each selected from time to time to read and talk about. In the process, somewhere along with being exposed to over two hundred poems, they developed a healthy respect for

each other as individuals, a genuine closeness as a class and a desire to become involved in various class related ventures such as the publication of a class poetry magazine to which each member contributed at least one piece of verse, and the presentation of an assembly program to which the entire student body was invited. Everything they touched was a success, but none of it would have worked at all if even one person had been left out.

Afterword

If all this seems supremely idealistic, it's because I put on my rose-colored glasses and looked backward. Things are always lovlier in retrospect. Now I can only look forward to the next lucky time when I have only sixteen students in a class. Miracle of miracles! What I won't do then.

by:

Nancy Womack

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